

Testimony in support of Raised Bill No. 945

AN ACT CONCERNING WORLD LANGUAGES REQUIREMENTS

Dear Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann and members of the Education Committee,

My name is Manuela Wagner. I am Assistant Professor of Foreign Language Education, a Teachers for a New Era Fellow, Director of Critical Languages, and Director of the Linkage Through Language Program at the University of Connecticut. I make this testimony as a private person and based on my expertise as an applied linguist.

I support bill 945 that requires two credits of world language study for high school graduation. In order for our students to become competitive in their profession and functional in their private lives we need to make sure that they are able to communicate effectively with members of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Providing opportunities and even incentives for our students to learn world languages and to become culturally aware and interculturally competent should be one of our most important goals in education. Indeed, global citizenship, international education and diversity are just a few of the buzzwords we encounter every day in K-16 curricula.

It is my belief that we put our students at a disadvantage if we do not require a mandatory world language high school graduation requirement. More specifically, I fear that we widen the achievement gap and prevent Connecticut students from accessing equitable resources in their education. It is conceivable that more affluent districts would continue to offer world language courses even in the absence of a world language graduation requirement, whereas less affluent school districts might limit their world language education offerings if world languages were not a requirement. This would put students in less affluent communities at a distinct disadvantage in continuing their education and on the job market.

I am especially concerned with findings in the proposed High School Reform "The Connecticut Plan: Academic and Personal Success for Every Middle and High School Student" (<http://www.cea.org/upload/Ad-Hoc-Final-Plan-HS-Reform.pdf>), which

removed the planned 2-year world language high school graduation requirement. The report stated the following reasons for this decision: inequitable opportunities for students to take world language courses in elementary and middle school, "statewide shortage of world language teachers", and reasons "centering on what scholars know about children's acquisition of language" (p. 16).

Although I agree with the general notion of that teaching languages earlier is good practice, I believe it would be detrimental to our students' education if we removed the planned world language graduation requirement.

There seems to be the general myth that children learn languages so much more easily and effectively than adults. As early as the seventies, research has shown that adolescents and adults have advantages in some areas of language acquisition (Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978). There are studies in support of a critical period for second language acquisition (Johnson and Newport, 1989). However, other studies show that we have to take many factors into account and that post-puberty learners of a world language can achieve native-like proficiency (e.g., Birdsong, 1992; Birdsong and Molis, 2001). The important conclusion in this context is that research investigating age-related factors of foreign language acquisition provides a much more complex picture than "the earlier, the better" (for an overview of research in age-related factors see e.g., Marinova-Todd, Marshall, and Snow, 2000; Birdsong 1999). Pronunciation seems to be an area that is related to advantages of early second language acquisition, but there are also studies showing that children take longer initially to learn certain grammatical structures than adolescents and adults (e.g., Birdsong 2005). We would probably agree that accent is not the most important aspect in foreign language education. I personally have an accent and I feel that I am able to communicate my intents in my second language, which is English. Birdsong (2005; p. 36) concludes:

There is an understandable tendency in discussions of the underlying sources of age effects in L2 learning and processing to isolate a single mechanism or to focus on one type of mechanism. Yet, this practice often simplifies the phenomena in question and polarizes stances on an extremely textured set of issues.

In summary, research regarding age-related factors in foreign language acquisition is complex. Independently of how we interpret the results of this research we cannot argue that students have advantages if we do not require a world language for graduation in high school. The argument to eliminate a foreign language requirement at this time because we do not have enough schools with foreign language programs in place in lower grades does not help students who graduate from high school and does not create more language programs in lower, middle or upper grades.

I agree that it would be beneficial for students to be exposed to world language study from elementary through high school. However, I consider it a wrong conclusion to wait until such programs are in place because we hinder our students from having equitable opportunities in their education now. McLaughlin (1992) addresses this issue among other important questions for language educators in the article "Myths and misconception about second language learning: what every teacher needs to unlearn" (available at <http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/pubs/ncrcdssl/epr5.htm>). The five myths he investigates are:

- 1) Children learn second languages quickly and easily (p.1)
- 2) The younger the child, the more skilled in acquiring a second language (p.3)
- 3) The more time students spend in a second language context, the quicker they learn the language (p.4)
- 4) Children have acquired a second language once they can speak it (p.5)
- 5) All children learn a second language the same way (p.5)

A report by the Business Forum for Multilingualism established by the European Commission entitled "Languages Mean Business: Companies Work Better with Languages" confirmed a former recommendation of "mother tongue plus two".

Although EU initiatives and community funding can provide an important impetus to the work at national and regional levels, the bulk of the work when it comes to supporting multilingualism will have to be done by the Member States. It is therefore important that the Member States continue to work towards their mutually agreed common objective from the Summit meeting in Barcelona 2002: Every citizen should learn two languages in addition to his or her mother tongue.

We would like to see multilingualism being encouraged more actively at all school levels. First and foremost, the choice of languages needs to be

widened. At higher levels, learning methods need to be more applied and practice oriented. Proper recognition should be awarded for language skills in school curricula and at a later stage in the assessment of job candidates. In a different context, language skills need to be acknowledged in an appropriate way in centrally negotiated agreements between the social partners. <http://www.rln-london.com/pdf/LanguageMeanBusinessReport.pdf>, p.15)

It makes sense that the ability to communicate with people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds will not only give EC students an edge in the workforce but ours here in the United States as well. We know that our students enjoy many advantages when they are able to communicate with people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Eliminating the planned world language high school graduation requirement will put our students at an educational, economic and civic disadvantage and will certainly not lead to better world language proficiency in our students.

Reinstating world languages as a planned high school graduation requirement will ensure that a) world language education is a core subject that is taken seriously in every school, b) students have more equitable opportunities to continue their studies in higher education and have a better chance to become competitive in today's globalized world.

Thank you.

Birdsong, D. (2005) Age and Second Language Acquisition and Processing: A Selective Overview. Language Learning 56/1, pp. 9-49.

Birdsong, D. (1999) Second Language Acquisition and the Critical Period Hypothesis. Second Language Acquisition Research: Theoretical and Methodological Issues. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Johnson, J., Newport, M. (1989). Critical Period Effects in Second Language Learning: The influence of maturational state on the acquisition of English as a Second Language. Cognitive Psychology 21/1, pp. 60-99.

McLaughlin, B. Myths and Misconceptions about Second Language Learning: What Every Teacher Needs to Unlearn. Educational Practice Report 5. National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning. Available at: <http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/pubs/ncrcdssl/epr5.htm>

Snow, C., Hoefnagel-Höhle, M. (1978). The critical period for language acquisition: Evidence from second language learning. Child Development 49/4, pp. 1114-1128.

Online Reports:

Languages Mean Business: Companies Work Better with Languages.
by the Business Forum for Multilingualism established by the European Commission. At:
<http://www.rln-london.com/pdf/LanguageMeanBusinessReport.pdf>

The Connecticut Plan: Academic and Personal Success for Every Middle and High School Student. At: <http://www.cca.org/upload/Ad-Hoc-Final-Plan-HS-Reform.pdf>